DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 217 104 UD 022 279

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TITLE Figurative Language of Disadvantaged Blacks as Related to Poverty, Music, Poetry, Language and Reading.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 22p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Culture; *Black Dialects; Black Education; Disadvantaged Youth; Elementary Secondary Education; English; *Figurative Language; *Folk Culture; Music; Poetry; *Reading Improvement

ABSTRACT

The unjustified assumption that black children have limited verbal or articulation skills stems from the fact that blacks use figurative, nonliteral, and nonstandard language in the classroom. The language that most disadvantaged blacks learn at home and bring to the classroom is a restricted form born out of poverty and limited exposure to good language models. This kind of figurative language is reflected in black folk songs, spirituals, and poetry which express emotions, experiences, consciousness of the world, and religious fervor. The language in these literary forms is often mispronounced, misspelled, and ungrammatical, and must be translated to become meaningful to those who are used to standard English. Disadvantaged black children are often judged to be underdeveloped with respect to language. In fact, they have a fully developed language system which is different from standard, middle class English. Teachers' failure to recognize black language patterns as different rather than deficient leads to negative teacher attitudes, students' reading difficulties, and school failure. To improve disadvantaged black students' reading skills, it is important to adjust materials to suit the learner and hire competent reading teachers. (MJL)

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ED217104

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE OF DISADVANTAGED BLACKS AS RELATED TO POVERTY MUSIC, POETRY, LANGUAGE, AND READING

Submitted for Publication

by

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Over several decades there have been numerous debates of both theoretical and practical significance regarding the figurative language of American blacks. Figurative language is defined as using words out of their literal meaning where the readers or listeners have to translate words, sentences, and the grammatical structure into standard terms to understand fully what is being said.

It has been assumed for a number of years that black children have limited verbal skills, or at best, have some difficulty in articulation. What is really being said is that those verbal skills unique to the black community are not reworded in the middle-class classroom.

Textbooks are loaded with the concepts of neuroses and Freudian interpretations. For the most part, black people do not have neuroses or unreal problems. Black people often have what this writer calls "Niggerosis." Niggerosis comes from being called black, being called "Nigger," from being told they have an IQ of 80 when they recognize they are intelligent but cannot prove it, and from dealing with real problems such as not having enough money, fighting roaches, frozen water pipes, rats, and other problems.

Implications of Study

This study is designed to help teachers become aware that figurative language of disadvantaged blacks will not disappear from the classroom because it is not standard English. Teachers will have to learn to listen more carefully, make the translations, and make the appropriate correction without damaging the motivation and self-concept of the child.

Poverty, music, poetry, language, and reading areas were selected because they are areas of communication that are well known in our

society and are directly related to environmental factors that are common in schools.

Poverty

Recent reports about poverty and hunger in America have created an unusual amount of controversy among educators. Schrimshaw (1968) reported that two-thirds of the world's children live in the developing countries. Berg (1967) estimated that half of the deaths in developing countries occur among children under six years of age. Tunley (1966) believes that a high proportion of the two million mentally retarded children in the United States are born to poor parents, but many of these defects could be prevented by simple medication and treatment before birth.

By the time the child is age three, the brain has reached eighty per cent of its adult weight compared with twenty per cent for the rest of the body. Prenatal care for mothers of disadvantaged children is almost nonexistent. Disadvantaged black mothers more frequently breast feed their babies than middle-class mothers. Sometimes the mother is so undernourished that she cannot provide milk for her baby. Occasionally malnourished children arrive at school with cases of beriberi, pellagra, or hookworms.

There is also an important and irretrievable loss of learning ability during the most critical years of intellectual development. Prominent nutritionists suggest the damage is irreparable, even in the unlikely prospect that the malnourished child eventually has access to proper nutrients.

On May 21, 1968, the CBS Television Network broadcasted an hour-long program entitled "Hunger in America." This documentation revealed the

thirty million Americans that are impoverished, with a family income below $3,000 a year. Most of this population are disadvantaged blacks who are not included in federal food programs.

No set of rationalizations can change this fact or justify it. Educators do not presently control sufficient power or resources to eradicate this blight from society, but it is clear that educational programs are essential for equipping present and future generations to make intelligent decisions about poverty and health concerns.

Poverty and Figurative Language

Currently attention has focussed glaringly upon the educationally disadvantaged children in our schools. Becker (1952) reported that disadvantaged children score lower than those of middle-class children in classroom performance. The generally low educational achievement of lower-class black children is causing a realization that many of these children are not benefiting from educational programs.

Poverty has a direct bearing on language development. Disadvantaged blacks who are poverty stricken have limited opportunities to hear good language models. The child has learned what the consequences of being poor means. Some writers postulate that the type of language spoken in lower-class families is a restricted form of language, whereas middle-class families use a more elaborate form. Bernstein (1960) believes that this difficulty is likely to increase as the child goes through school unless he learns the middle-class language used in school.

Disadvantaged children bring their language to school with them. Most often they have to communicate in school with a language that is not common in their communities. Slang is common with poverty disadvantaged

children. Statements such as "Right on," meaning "with approval," "give me some skin," meaning handshake, "main man," meaning a good friend, "check it out" meaning to look into something, "We gonna get down," meaning have a fight, "gig, synonymous with party, "shine him on, meaning ignore him, "your mama is a put-down," and "shuckin and givin" meaning putting some one on.

The teacher has to hear the statement and translate it immediately into meaningful terms in order to communicate with children who will bring their expressions to school with them.

Black Music as Figurative Language

For blacks, music has been the most socially permissive vehicle used as a medium of social comment, criticism and protest to express aggression. Black music is a direct expression of emotions, consciousness of the world, moods, concerns, aspirations and desperations. Black music, then, is a result of reciprocal cultural interchange.

Black spirituals express feelings of sympathy between words and music. This is true because of the differences in living conditions of the people who originated them. The first credit for the introduction of the Negro spirituals belongs to Fisk University of Nashville, Tennessee. A group of singers from Fisk from 1871-1875 presented many concerts in the United States and Europe. When the Fisk Singers toured Europe, they sang in England, Scotland, and Germany, spending eight months in the latter country. Johnson (1951) said that their concerts were attended by most cultured and sophisticated people as well as the general public. Queen Victoria and others were among those who listened to them. As a result of the extensive tour, the spirituals gained recognition as an appreciative type of music.

In 1619 a Dutch vessel, carrying twenty African natives, landed at Jamestown, Virginia. Their slaves were sold rapidly to colonial settlers, thus beginning the African slave trade in American colonies. To accommodate this trade, Africa was robbed of millions of men, women and children who were cast into dark dungeons in ships and brought to this country. Those who survived this beastly trip were thrown immediately into slavery. These slaves came from various localities in Africa and did not speak the same language. As a result, they were cut off from the moorings of their native cultures, scattered without regard to their tribal relations; they had to adjust to a completely alien civilization, to learn a strange language and, moreover, they were held under an increasingly harsh system of slavery.

It is, of course, pardonable to smile at the naivete often exhibited in the lyrics of the music, but it should be remembered that in scarcely no instance was anything humorous intended. When it came to the use of words, the composer was struggling as best he could, considering his limitations in language usage and his weak interpretation of the facts in his source of material--generally the Bible.

Blacks took complete refuge in Christianity and the spirituals were born of sorrow in the heart of religious fervor. They exhibited, moreover, a reversion to the simple principles of primitive and communal Christianity.

The spirituals played an important part in the life of southern blacks during the two decades preceding the war, and for a considerable time after their freedom. Sanctioned by the church, primarily religious in origin, and always regarded as something sacred, it was nevertheless, freely admitted into the duties and pressures of secular life. Frequently

it was used to calm and to encourage blacks to greater efforts in time of danger, or as triumphant chants when danger passed. At other times the spiritual merely relieved the monotony by constant pulling or gave vent to a sheer overabundance of physical energy; it lightened the labor of the field workers; it was crooned by the women as they went about their household tasks, whether in a cabin or at the "big house." The spiritual was also used for dancing, but here a word of caution is needed. Blacks drew a very sharp line between dancing in our ordinary sense of the word. This dancing was called the "holy dance," or shout.

There is an almost uncontrollable desire to rise and throw the body into rhythms. It is not strange, then, that there sprang up, under the sanction, if not the entire approval of the church, a form of religious dancing of "dancing before the Lord," that might be indulged in at proper times with proper restrictions. It was never considered as normal during the regular Sunday service.

Outside of the church, the spiritual gained its importance in the everyday life of blacks on the plantation, not because it was the only type he knew, but rather because of certain restrictions placed upon him by his religion. A church member was supposed to avoid worldly things, and this was understood to include worldly songs.

It follows, then, that whenever the church member had occasion for singing he must have adapted a spiritual for his need. The fact that he commonly did this had, in turn, an effect on the singing of a non-church member at all social gatherings. At any such gathering, or among any group of workers, a number of church members were always included. If a purely secular song were sung, members would remain silent. If, however, spirituals were employed, all would join in.

Figurative and translated versions of spirituals may be seen in such compositions as listed.

Figurative	Translation
A lillie talk with Jesus makes it rite.	A little talk with Jesus makes it right.
All God's chillum got wings	All Gods children have wings
All I doz, the church keep grumblin	All I do, the church keeps on grumbling
I lay dis body dow	I lay this body down.
Daniel saw de stone	Daniel saw the stone
I walk in de moonlight	I walk in the moonlight
Deres no hiddin down dere	There's no hiding down here.
Everytime I feel de spirit	Everytime I feel the spirit
Gimme dat ol time religion	Give me that old time religion
Gimme Jesus	Give me Jesus
Joshua fit de battle of Jericho	Joshua fought the battle of Jericho
Bye and bye	By and by
Git on board, little chillum	Get on board little children
Listen to de lams	Listen to the lambs

Folk music consists of songs that are sacred, work songs, jubilees, sorrow songs, plantation songs, and spirituals. It is the flower of an art which is formalized and developed among a people whose training was verbal instead of visual. Examples of figurative translations are:

Figurative	Translation
John Henry	Railroad work song
Good bye pretty mama	So long pretty woman
Mike	A short name for Michael
The Wreck on the C & O	A railroad work song

Buller holler	A work song on the road
Reason I stay on de job so long	Pride in one's work
Level camp holler	plantation song
Shot my pistol in de heart of town	Celebrating and having fun
Black Betty	A beautiful black woman
The Hammer Song	Working on the railroad
Rosie	A beautiful woman
Old Rattler	A bad man
Long gone	leaving home
De midnight special	Having fun after dark
Bad man ballad	A mean man

Blacks used folk songs as a means of relieving hardships in their daily work. Butcher (1957) saw folk songs as being regional. The Virginia and Upper South, the Creole South, the Seaboard Lower South, the Mississippi strain, the Southwest, and the Mountain Music all have their figurative patterns.

John Henry is a typical example of one of the best black folk songs every written. The concerted movements, the grunts, emerging at each stroke of the pick of the hammer, the off pitch, the slurring, sliding attacks made upon the tones and the harmonic patterns, all have to be seen and heard to appreciate the figurative patterns. John Henry was considered as the fastest and hardest steel-driving man of his time. This ballad is a typical example of the hardships endured by blacks in southern gangs and railroad workers with a pick and a hammer driving spikes with unbelievable power. This folk song, even today, continues to capture the hearts of those who have heard it before and those who hear it for the first time.

"The Shuffle Chant" is another folk song which pictures blacks working on the railroad moving rails. As they used their long bars, one person would sing the first line of the song. On the second line, all would sing together and move the rail. This would continue until the job was completed.

Lomax (1953), in his research, stated that blacks will play with the melody and rhythms, vary them, keep silent, burst out suddenly, and impose a great variety of ornament and original deviation upon the pattern of the tune. The musical contents of folk songs is a pure study within itself. Very little at the beginning were ever written down due to the illiteracy of the blacks, the rhythm and tune were never repeated in the same manner and singing in tune or on pitch had no meaning at all to black folk songs. The lyrics of black folk songs were similar to the spirituals in that they were often mispronounced, misspelled and used "I done done what ya tol me to do." First the verb tense is used incorrectly. "I done done" is not even a colloquial expression. "Ya" supposedly represents "you," is misspelled and mispronounced. As is "tol," representing "told." In the folk song "Carry Me Back to Ole' Virginny," it is mispronounced and misspelled. "Ole" is acceptable in music and poetry. From the above comparison, one can readily see figurative patterns.

A new encyclopedia of jazz and dance band terms was originated by black musicians.

Figurative	Translated
An AX	Your musical instrument
Dig	Do you understand
Chops	The position of your lips
Sacktime	Go to bed

Cool	I like what you are doing
Set	On the bandstand
Goof	You are playing lousy
Skins	The drummer swing
Soul	Playing from the heart
Crap	You can't play the music
My man	An outstanding performer
It's a drag	A noisy audience
Pres	Outstanding musicianship
Stoned	High
Wailing	A superior performer
Funky	Good musicianship
Gig	A dance job
Box	A guitar or piano

The blues genre is one of the musical ideas that grew from spirituals. The dominant blues mood, a lament, begins in a sentimental expression of grief or hard luck, sometimes ending on an intensification of the same mood, or turned to self-ridicule or fatalistic resignation. Irony and disillusionment are frequent motifs. The tunes are built around a succession of three common chords: the tonic triad, the subdominant and the dominant seventh.

The lyrics of the blues and spirituals are similar and each has its way of revealing sorrow and happiness. "Gonna lay doen my burden, down by the riverside" in a spiritual becomes "Gonna lay my head right on de railroad track" in blues. The blues has long been an authentic type of Negro folk music in which the singer can relate his inner feeling from the music as well as the words.

Poetry

The traditions of black poetry derive from influences and sources as far apart as those that inspired Jupiter Hammon's "An address to Blacks in the State of New York" in 1787 and Horton's book of verse, "The Hope of Liberty." on the one hand, and Phillis Wheatley's refined and tempered poems on various subjects, religious and moral (1773) and Ler Ceneller on the other. The lines from these to Paul Lawrence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson, to Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, to Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks, to Melvin B. Tolson and Robert Hayden, to Moser Carl Holman and LeRoi Jones, are not hard to draw from. Examples of figurative patterns and translated versions may be observed in the following poetry. A Negro love song by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, "A Negro Love Song, demonstrates the point.

Figurative	Translated
Seen my lady home las night,	I took my lady home last night,
Jump back, honey, Jump back,	I love you, honey, I love you.
Hel' huh han' an' sque'z it tight	I gave her a hug and a squeeze
Jump back, honey, jump back	I love you, honey, I love you.
Hyeahd huh sigh a little sigh	Heard her sigh a little sigh
Seen a light gleam from huh eye,	A gleam cane from her eye
An' a smile go flittin' by--	With a smile on her face
Jump back, honey, jump back	I love you, honey, I love you.
Hyeahd de win' blow thoo the pine	The wind blows through the pines
Jump back, honey, jump back	I love you, honey, I love you.
Mockin' bird was singin' fine	A mocking bird was singing
Jump back, honey, jump back.	I love you, honey, I love you.
An' my hert was beating so,	And my heart was beating so
When I reached by lady's do.	When I entered my lady's door.

Dat I couldn't ba to go	That I couldn't bear to go
Jump back, honey, jump back,	I love you, honey, I love you.
Put my ahm aroun' huh waist	Put my arm around her waist
Jump back, honey, jump back	I love you, honey, I love you.
Raised huh lips an' tood a tase	Raised her lips and took a taste,
Jump back, honey, jump back.	I love you, honey, I love you.
Love me, honey, Love me true?	Do you really love me?
Love me well ez I love you?	As well as I love you?
An' she answer'd "Coosed I do"--	Her answer was "Of course I do."
Jump back, honey, jump back.	I love you, honey, I love you.

Langston Hughes' poem, "Mother to son," is an example of figurative patterns.

Figurative	Translated
Well son, I'll tell you: life for me	A black mother giving
Ain't been no crystal stair.	advice to her son when
It's had tacks in it, and splinters,	he appears discouraged
and boards torn up, and places	with life. She is say-
with no carpet on the floor.	ing to him, "Don't give
Bare. But all the time Ise been	up; keep working, because
a-climbin on, and reachin landins,	life for me raising you
and turnin corners, and sometimes goin'	has not been easy.
in the dark where there ain't been no light.	
So boy, don't you turn back, Don't you	
set down on the steps cause you finds	
it's kinder hard. Don't you fall now--for	
I'se still goin', honey, Ise still climbin,	
and life for me ain't been no crystal stair.	

Frederick Douglas, in his poem "We Raise de Wheat," is an example of figurative expression.

Figurative	Translated
We raise de wheat, dey gib us de corn	We raise the wheat, they give us the corn
We bake the bread, de gib us de crust	We bake the bread, they give us the crust
We sif de meal, dey gib us de huss	We make the meal, we get the husks
We peel the meat, dey big us de skin	We prepare the meats, we get the scraps
And dat's de way dey take us in	That is how we are tricked.
We skim de pot, dey gib us liquor	We make sure they have enough to eat
And say dat's good enough for niggers	What more can we expect.

Parody poem reflects figurative feelings.

Figurative	Translated
Our fadder, which are in heaben	Our Father, which art in heaven,
White man owe me leben and pay me seben.	The whiteman owes me eleven dollars but paid me only seven dollars.
Dy Kingdom come; dy will be done	This is God's Kingdom, and he knows best
An, if I hadn't tuck dat, I wouldn't git none.	If I had not taken that, I would not have received anything.

Language

There is a major dispute in the literature concerning the nature of the language problem of economically disadvantaged black children. Many such children are verbally destitute, that is, they have not yet developed a functionally adequate or structurally systematic language code as stated by Smith (1963). Generally some studies tend to explain the absence of language development in the child with regard to such environmental factors as limited mother-child verbal interaction, noise in the

environment, and sensory social deprivations. Standard English has been the criterion upon which the language underdevelopment studies rest.

Such children have systematic but undeveloped language behavior, and therefore their underdeveloped system leads to cognitive deficits. Bereter (1965) ranked speech patterns hierarchically according to abstractions and cognitive complixity.

The basic point of contention between the positions is clearly whether or not these children are generally linguistically deficient or linguistically different. Being either linguistically different or deficient creates a handicap for the speaker of such dialect. However, how we articulate the problem is extremely germaine to the kinds of programs we develop for dealing with this problem. Black disadvantaged children have a fully developed, but different system from that of standard English (Bailey 1967). We do not question if the child has learned a language. He contends that the language of black children is not one of linguistic competence but one of linguistic interference between their own highly developed system and that of standard English.

The history of black dialect is deep rooted in American history. The evidence offered for this assumption includes content analysis of written sampling the language of black Americans over the past two and one-half centuries, as well as recent descriptive and experimental research on the speech patterns of black children and adults.

Stewart (1967) has found numerous examples of current black dialect patterns in the language of black slaves. One such category is the use of "be" to indicate a store of habitual action as compared to a momentary one. Thus "He be sick," indicates a chronic state of illness while "He sick" implies a temporary ailment. Some common expressions of black

figurative dialects and slangs are:

Figurative	Translated
Bat	Ugly female
Big daddy	A friend
Rat now	Right now
I be bus left	I missed the bus
Getting knee deep in your stuff	I am going to fight you
I could care less	I could not care less
Mother's day	Welfare checks arriving
We gonna get down	fight
Shine him on	to ignore
Playing the dozens	Saying unkind things about someone's mother
Fox	A good-looking woman
Can you dig it	Do you understand
Groovy	Pleasureable
Check it out	Examine the information you are getting to see if it's correct.
Oreo	A black person with white feelings and attitudes
Gimme de pin	Give me the pin
Give him book	Give him the book
Ise count to tin	I have counted to ten
I'll bees with you	I'll be with you
Poor me a drink	Pour me a drink
Give me some moor	Give me some more
Give me the boil	Give me the ball
This is oil I have	This is all I have
Give me ten since	Give me ten cents

Crack up	Laughter
Bull jive	not sincere
Ace	A good friend
Hepcat	A person that is aware of what's going on.

Reading

A reading program in any language, at any stage in a student's career, is likely to be effective in proportion to its use of the language habits that the student has acquired in speaking.

The black disadvantaged child is often repeating a significantly different language from that of his middle-class teachers and students. Some of his teachers have wrongly viewed his language as pathological, disordered, or lazy speech. This failure to recognize the interference from the child's different linguistic system, and consequent negative teacher attitudes towards the child and his language, leads directly to reading difficulties and subsequent school failure. It is crucial to understand how to educate disadvantaged adolescents.

The language difference, and not deficiency, must be considered in the educational process of the black ghetto child. Thus, the real need to distinguish between failure and the explicit relationship between reading and previously acquired auditory language often leads to ambiguities as to whether a particular difficulty is a reading problem, language problem, or both.

Every child brings to school, when he comes, five or six years of language and of experience. His language is closely entwined with the culture of his community; it embodies the cultural values and structures the way in which he may perceive his world and communicate his reactions

with others. Ironically, well-meaning educators will often emphatically reject his language. This hurts because it endangers the means which he depends on to communicate with others.

In reading, we must look at standard English as opposed to non-standard English. The reader must read from standard English the best she can, and translate the meaning. Examples are:

Figurative and Nonstandard	Translated and Standard
He goin	He is going
John cousin	John's cousin
I got five cents	I have five cents
I drunk the milk	I drank the milk
He walk home	He walked home
I going	I am going
He run hume	He runs home
Us got to do it	We have to do it
He be here	He is here
I don't got none	I don't have any
I axe did he do it	I asked if he did it
He over to his friend house	He is at his friend's house
He be here	He is here all the time
I want a apple	I want an apple.
I'ma go home	I will go home

If we are sincere in improving reading skills for disadvantaged adolescents, especially blacks, the following recommendations may be helpful in improving the reading program in public schools. These recommendations are:

1. The language difference, not deficiency, must be considered in the educational process of the black ghetto child.
2. Adjust the materials to suit the child.
3. Hire enough competent reading teachers as we do coaches in public schools. Far too many black adolescents are spending an excess of valuable time in sports instead of needed academics.
4. Promote academic excellence throughout the total school program. Require academic grades before allowing students to participate in any form of school activities.
5. Set up needed reading labs throughout the school for practical reading lessons.

Reading is the key to life. The advantages of reading as a means of communication are available to skilled readers. Every child can be a winner through reading. Hopefully, we will improve this sad plight in our schools.

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